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## Looking On and Overlooking: An Analysis of Oversight in Online Tutoring

[Spring 2008 / Focus](#)

by **Lori B. Baker**, *Southwest Minnesota State University*

**On-line consulting introduces potential risks and benefits via a dual sense of "oversight"**



Lori B. Baker

As a writing center director, I am charged with overseeing my staff of undergraduate tutors, as well as making sure the center functions in accordance with its budget and mission. All of my duties—training tutors, scheduling, working with faculty, performing public relations, guiding tutors' ongoing professional development—can be viewed as forms of oversight. I find the term "oversight" to be a very apt lens for considering the work of a writing center director because of its dual meaning: it can mean "looking over," "supervising"—or it can suggest the opposite, as in "overlooking" or "forgetfulness, missing."

I like to think that I am supervising in an exemplary fashion. Yet I know, and I need to remind myself, that I forget or overlook key components of my job daily. It is easy to get caught up in routines or in responding to others' concerns and not see—or not re-see—issues that concern my staff, the students, or the center's well-being. Further, I need to examine my supervision of the center in terms of greater critical concern. As I embrace certain practices in our daily operation, what am I overlooking in terms of the values that underlie those practices? What I think is exemplary might need interrogation if I am accepting wholesale the values that other departments or faculty expect my tutors to enact. My own writing center theory and practice continually need critical examination as well.

**Viewing writing center work through the dual lens of oversight [...] can help those of us in the writing center field remain vigilant and critical of our pedagogies, philosophies, and practices.**

Further, I am rarely alone in my oversight of the writing center. Different

constituencies on campus have a stake in oversight, from the tutors themselves to the students, the faculty we work with, and the administration. Sometimes those constituencies are actively trying to supervise what we do, and sometimes they are overlooking us; both forms of oversight can have positive and negative consequences.

Keeping the dual nature of “oversight” in mind can be a useful heuristic in identifying the complex layers of supervision and authority that writing center work entails. Geller et al. argue that really looking at, really *seeing*, “the little things” in our everyday writing centers can open up our understandings about how our centers operate. Geller et al. invoke the concept of Trickster, a mythological figure which “crosses both physical and social boundaries” (15) and is often responsible for disruption; Trickster moments in writing centers happen when there is a “rupture of the assumed” (16). They argue that rather than ignore these ruptures or attempt to gloss over them, we need to welcome the disruptions as learning opportunities to review and possibly revise or recreate our work in writing centers; they urge writing center directors to embrace “a Trickster habit of mind” (25). Viewing writing center work through the dual lens of oversight provides a way to get into that Trickster habit. It can help those of us in the writing center field remain vigilant and critical of our pedagogies, philosophies, and practices as well as provide us with a useful tool for examining what others want from us—whom we are willing to cooperate with and why.

To explore the heuristic power of oversight in more detail, I will use the example of online tutoring at my institution. I will discuss how the asynchronous, targeted online tutoring that we do is the result of oversight not just by me, but by tutors, students, and the faculty who requested it. Throughout the discussion, I will describe not only who appears to be invested with the authority of oversight but how each party has potential for oversight. Recognizing the potential for oversight is important because as writing center directors we cannot always know who is actually looking on, yet we need to be aware of the possibilities. I will close by discussing how my analysis of oversight helps me to identify where theory and practice truly merge—or could potentially merge—in my center.

## **Background**

At my institution, a small (3,500), rural undergraduate liberal arts university with master’s programs in education and business, we entered into targeted online asynchronous tutoring conducted via email in mid-spring of 2006. This was our first foray into online services; previously our work had all been conducted face-to-face and was focused on serving primarily undergraduate students, with a rare graduate student coming in. In early 2006, the Education Department invited me to a meeting and specifically requested that our tutors (who are all undergraduates) begin working in an online forum with their master’s students, the majority of whom were in off-campus programs. We went to the provost together as a united front asking for funding and were awarded the funding we requested. I quickly trained several tutors, and we began after spring break of that year.

## **Who Is Overseeing Whom?.**

Most often we in writing centers strive to cooperate and collaborate with entities across campus. That is certainly part of our writing center’s mission statement and comprises much of the spiel that is given to prospective

students, whom we pledge to help with any paper for any class across campus, any year that they are at the university. The cooperation with the Education Department to create an online tutoring opportunity for their students fits with that mission. At first glance this arrangement seems simple enough: we were asked to provide services, and so we did.

However, if we apply the concepts of oversight to this situation, we can begin to see the layers of complexity that arise. I had been very cautious about entering into electronic tutoring precisely because of oversight issues. I was aware of populations of students that we needed to reach, yet even more aware of the lack of resources and funding that were needed in order to reach them. As Hobson warns, "there are implications (positive and negative) to each decision that writing center personnel make about the role(s) that technology will/should play in their particular context" (478). Given our student population, given our history of frozen budgets, I worried about the outcomes of going online in this fashion: I wondered, for example, whether the simple email system of tutoring would be sufficient for these students? for the tutors who would work with them? how the choice to put more money towards online tutoring would end up affecting the staffing for face-to-face tutorials? whether the online tutoring would overtake the face-to-face?

**As I engage in this training and use this technology, I have to keep asking myself what I might be overlooking: what might make for better practice? [...] and what, ultimately, am I inculcating into the tutors in terms of what our center's core values are or should be?**

In addition, I wanted to carefully create an online tutoring environment that captured, as best it could, the theoretical and pedagogical foundations that I feel are most important in a writing center. As Hall and Wolf write, in establishing an online site they wanted to "focus on meeting local needs and extending . . . our writing center's pedagogy, based upon a theory of knowledge as contextual and socially constructed"; my goal was the same (1). Yet I was also aware, as Blythe, citing the work of Andrew Feenberg, states, that if you take a substantive view of technology, the "design will fundamentally change" the nature of the interaction.

All of my considerations about how best to begin online tutoring did not become moot, but did become mediated, when the Education Department asked us to tutor for them. While, on the one hand, it was exactly what I was waiting for—specific demand and resources to meet that demand—on the other hand, it came with its own set of oversight considerations. The oversight associated with online tutoring is different than with a face-to-face setting. Further, in this targeted situation, we can see how the Education faculty, their graduate students, I as the writing center director, and the undergraduate tutors are all sharing in dual forms of oversight.

#### *Education Faculty and Students*

For example, the initial and subsequent meetings with the education professors helped me shape the parameters for our online tutoring, such as the use of email for the tutorials with their students rather than a synchronous system such as scheduled chats, and the response time for the email exchanges. The professors gave me materials to use to train the tutors on what to look for and what the expectations were in masters' theses. Because we are (for now)

targeting a certain population rather than opening up online tutoring to everyone on campus, the graduate students' access to the writing center is filtered through their professors, who send out a handout from me with the instructions—that is, if they choose to do so. All of these components mean that the professors in the Education Department are vested in overseeing the writing center in addition to me. It also means that as I train the tutors to work with this program, I am training them using the materials from the education professors, embracing to an extent their values and expectations for the thesis work, showing my tutors how to do the same.

This begs the question, who is “sent” to online tutoring by the professors? Are they selecting certain students to send our way—those whose writing does not match with the standard academic prose—or are they sending the notice of online tutoring to all their students? It is impossible for me to know. I do not have oversight of that part of the equation. Some of my authority is shared with those outside the writing center, whose cooperation enabled me to expand services to them.

In addition, the graduate students themselves who use the online tutoring have the choice whether or not to share the comments they receive from tutors with their graduate directors and committees, or whether to share the comments they receive from their graduate directors and committees with the tutors. They can easily manipulate the “insert comments” feature or choose whether to send new drafts or ones with comments inserted back and forth. We make no special requests regarding this. It is up to the students and their own use of oversight to choose whether we see comments from others. We also would not know if the graduate directors or committees are asking to see our tutors' comments or requiring their students to provide that as evidence of using our services.

#### *My Oversight as Director*

As the writing center director, I maintain the most visible oversight in this project. For one thing, I supervise the hiring and training of tutors. In addition to training the tutors using the materials from the education professors as models, I also demonstrate to them how to use the “comment” feature in Word; we discuss how to write an appropriate email response that captures the positives and summarizes what is most needed in the documents sent to us; we read chapters from textbooks with how-to information in them to guide us. All of these activities are based on the “best practices” identified in writing center practice, and on embracing components of technology to help us.

As I engage in this training and use this technology, I have to keep asking myself what I might be overlooking: what might make for better practice? what technology might be more useful? and what, ultimately, am I inculcating into the tutors in terms of what our center's core values are or should be? Further—and this almost escaped my notice completely, as it is such an automatic practice for me—I have to be careful not to overlook who I am hiring as online tutors and why. In my first round of hiring, during mid-semester, I simply approached those tutors who I thought could “handle it”—those who I thought could communicate online via writing rather than talking, and who could work at the more complex level of graduate theses even though they were undergrads. In subsequent semesters, I have had to confront those hiring practices and consider training all tutors to work online as an expectation of employment.

In addition to training and hiring, I have oversight of the day-to-day online

tutoring assignments. Because of our current set-up, I check the writing center email each day for tutoring requests and then assign a tutor to each request. I do this by simply dragging the request into the tutor's folder in the email program. My supervisory role is much more visible to me in this regard than in our face-to-face center, where students make their own appointments with the tutors of their choosing. My supervision is also much more apparent to the students making the request, as I send emails back to them informing them of their tutor assignment; they see my name and signature line, a subtle but possibly reassuring nod of authority.

**Applying the dual concepts of oversight helps me to create a bridge between theories of pedagogy and our actual practice in online tutoring.**

The tutors are aware, perhaps subconsciously, perhaps quite consciously, of my supervision as well, as it is made clear to them that I can look at the email responses that they send to the students. We can, if we wish, use some of these responses as teachable moments for the tutors, reviewing how they wrote them. While it is not my practice to regularly go in and review their responses, I occasionally check them, and I usually let the tutors know via a brief comment in person with a compliment or a question if I have one. From the tutors' perspective, they do not know if or when I am reviewing their work unless I tell them. But the possibility is always there.

*The Oversight of Undergraduate Tutors*

Interestingly, given the email system that we use, the tutors have the same potential for oversight of each other as I do of them: at any time, they can easily go into each other's folders and see each other's responses. Every online tutor has the email password and login. They share this authority and responsibility with me and with each other. As mentioned above, we can use past responses for our tutor training sessions. What is difficult to capture in this type of training, however, is the tutor lore that comes out in our face-to-face center. When students are in the same space, looking and listening in on other sessions, they can exchange tips and comments freely. We are grappling with how to create that kind of fruitful peer oversight in the online tutoring.

The tutors also have a different form of self-oversight in terms of their schedules. While I oversee and sign their time sheets, they are on their own to track their hours because often their online tutoring is done at home and/or late in the day. My oversight involves trusting them to oversee their own schedules.

Besides seeing each other's comments if they so wish, as described earlier, the tutors often see the comments the students have already received from their thesis committee chairs or committee members, when students forward their drafts with those comments to the tutors. I would guess that those same committee members no doubt sometimes see the comments from the tutors when those drafts tutors have commented on are revised by the students and sent back to committee members. This method of using Word comments and sending drafts among the various parties for feedback again creates a very different form of oversight compared to face-to-face sessions, where tutors are trained not to write on the students' papers unless they are scribing for the student. Tutors and faculty alike can literally look over each other's writing; each can see the things that the other might be overlooking. Writing center theory has often commented on the triangulation that occurs between student-

tutor-teacher, but usually the teacher is only implied in the equation. Here, the teacher-the committee chair-is quite probably directly involved. In addition, the possibility of the committee and the writing center director taking part in or witnessing the exchanges expands the concept of triangulation even farther.

### **Oversight and Its Theoretical Implications for Our Online Project**

The expanded notion of triangulation, with the possibility of oversight on the part of all players, holds intriguing implications for writing center theory. The potential for more direct involvement on my part and on the part of the other tutors could help us to create more visibly (albeit virtually) a Burkean parlor such as Lunsford references (7), a place where we can all collaborate on the writing. It has the potential to become a virtual form of collaborative "ether," an analogy coined by Zuboff as described in Dave Healy's "From Place to Space" article (547). I could view this expanded triangulation and oversight in a positive way, as a physical extension of the socially-constructed and mediated writing center theory that I espouse. However, perhaps another perspective to consider is when and whether it is possible for the parlor to get too crowded. Sometimes I do not want to be overheard; I would prefer to be overlooked.

Further, as Healy describes, such oversight made possible by the electronic forum can easily become the panopticon, the twelve-sided prison with a central lookout as described by Bentham and Foucault, in which the consideration of always being observed affects every movement, every word (549). Healy fears that tutors who are aware of always being overseen will "shut down risk-taking" or otherwise fear to try out new or different strategies (550).

Applying the dual concepts of oversight helps me to create a bridge between theories of pedagogy and our actual practice in online tutoring. The oversight of each tutorial is dependent on what happens at that moment and over time with a given text. It is dependent on the constituencies and variables that initially enabled the tutorial and on how much oversight is actually in play. Analyzing our online tutoring using the concept of oversight helps me to consider how to better create the "collaborative ether" and how to negotiate the panopticon elements that are inherent in the current system. Through my analysis, I can see how we could make oversight more visible and useful in a positive sense in our training and tutoring practices and how we might gather more feedback on our processes from all involved.

We cannot always predict who will be involved in looking on and who will overlook us, but we also cannot ignore the possibilities of oversight and how that oversight can affect or influence pedagogy.

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